

Moments in History

Commemorating Women's Role in Canadian History



Ontario
Women's
Directorate

2 Carlton Street
12th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M5B 2M9



Issue 6 September 1994
The sixth in a series.

Women Overcome Obstacles and Win in Sports

The 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer, Norway, were Canada's best ever with Canadian athletes bringing home 13 medals. Women made a particularly good showing. Myriam Bédard from Québec made Canadian history when she became the first woman to win two Winter Olympic golds. She won her medals in the biathlon, a ski-and-shoot sport unknown to many Canadians only a few months before.

Women have come a long way in sports, but it's been a long and bumpy road.

As far back as the 16th century, Aboriginal women played "shinny" and raquet (both games were a cross between lacrosse and field hockey), and a kind of football called "shuttlecock." They also canoed but only rarely took part in racing games. By contrast, European women settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries were generally not allowed to take part in sporting activities because they were considered "unladylike." Indeed, the very clothing they wore, such as long skirts, limited their movements.

In the 1880s, the bicycle became a subtle instrument of social revolution, and an important leap forward for women in sports. The bicycle gave women new-found mobility and helped to break down the traditional thinking that it was unfeminine to be physically active. The bicycle also caused a fashion revolution as it required that women's sportswear be designed to allow for physical activities. More comfortable clothes like the bicycle skirt, bloomers and the golf suit soon made their appearance on the women's clothing rack.

The Golden Age

The First World War broke down many of the traditions and barriers women faced in daily life. As women replaced men in offices and factories, they also took to the playing fields and arenas of the country. Although women were by no means automatically accepted they played many male-dominated sports including hockey, lacrosse and cricket — sports which even today are largely closed to women.

The period between the 1920s and the outbreak of World War II was known as the "Golden Age" of women's sport in Canada. At the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, Canadian women dominated the track and field events. Olympic team members Bobbie Rosenfeld, Myrtle Cook, Ethel Smith, Jane Bell, Ethel Catherwood, and Jean Thompson made such an impressive showing that they became known as the "Matchless Six." When the team returned to Toronto with two gold medals, a silver and a bronze, a crowd of 300,000 flooded the streets to cheer them on.

Changing Times

The period following World War II was difficult for women. Soldiers returning home from the war needed to find gainful employment and women who had worked in factories and offices during the war years, were now asked to return to their traditional roles as mothers and housewives.

During this period, public attitudes were also shifting with people becoming increasingly intolerant of women's participation in sports. While diving, swimming, golf, tennis and synchronized swimming

were considered acceptable sports for women, sports such as ice hockey, baseball, track and field, and marathon swimming were not.

Only men's sports and teams were believed to be commercially viable, and this period saw the rise of commercialized professional spectator sports such as hockey, football and baseball. It became increasingly difficult for women to find sponsors and many women's sports organizations folded or merged with men's organizations.

A few women athletes did manage to attract public attention, however, primarily in individual sports. In 1947, Barbara Ann Scott won the world figure skating championship and in 1948, she went on to win the Olympic, World and European titles. Lucille Wheeler represented Canada at the 1956 Winter Olympics, and won a gold medal in alpine skiing.

Moving Forward

Today, public interest in fitness is booming. Girls and women are much more confident about pursuing physical activities related to personal interest and ability and any lack of opportunity for young women to participate in sports is increasingly questioned.

Despite these advances, however, inequalities still exist. Men still make up the majority of athletes who can make a living from playing sports, and professional sports like football, baseball, and hockey continue to dominate the sport scene.

Women are also under-represented in the area of sports administration. In comparison with the 1920s and '30s, when women formed their own associations and did most of the coaching, in 1992, only 35% of the nationally certified coaches in Ontario were women.

At the recreational level, girls and women often encounter a lack of acceptance and sometimes open discrimination. A case that attracted

much attention in 1976 involved nine-year old Gail Cummings from Huntsville, Ontario. With a keen interest in hockey and no girls' leagues in her area, Gail joined a boys' team as the goal tender. The Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA) claimed that her participation was against the rules. In support of this ruling, the president of the OMHA claimed that, many of the arenas could not provide separate dressing rooms for girls. Most disturbing, however, was his assertion that perhaps girls shouldn't be playing hockey anyway.

At the world-class level of competition, we see that the International Olympic Committee's recognition of the ability of women athletes has also been very slow. For example, after the 1928 Olympics, the Committee decided that women should not run the 800 metres event because the race was "too gruelling." Women did not regain the right to compete in this event until 1960. Even today, the number of events for women lag behind those for men. Of the 257 events at the 1992 Summer Olympic Games, 159 were open to men but only 86 were open to women.

Despite these obstacles, Canadian women have consistently brought home medals from the Olympic Games over the past 20 years. They have done particularly well in alpine skiing. Over the years, the following women have all won gold medals in this event: Nancy Greene in 1968 (Giant Slalom), Kathy Kreiner in 1976 (Giant Slalom) and more recently Kerrin Lee-Gartner in 1992 (Downhill).

Disabled women are rapidly entering sports such as track and field, swimming, tennis, power-lifting, boccie (similar to lawn bowling) and goalball (for the visually impaired) to name just a few. The success of Canadian women like Tracey Ferguson, an outstanding basketball player whose team won a gold medal at the 1992 Paralympics in Barcelona; Joanne Bow, who

won three gold medals in shot-put, discus and javelin; and Marie-Claire Ross, who won one silver and two bronze medals in swimming, has helped encourage younger disabled women to enter sports.

Black women have also had successes in sport. Sylvia Sweeney played for the Canadian women's Olympic basketball team in 1976 and 1984. In 1979, she was voted the most valuable player at the World Championships in women's basketball in Seoul, Korea.

Another outstanding Canadian athlete is Molly Killingbeck, a member of Canada's Olympic team in 1980, 1984 and 1988, and a participant in the World Championships of 1983 and 1987. Killingbeck has had a distinguished career in track and field.

She won a silver medal in the 4 X 400 relay at the 1984 Olympic Games, and has won gold at both the 1982 and the 1986 Commonwealth Games. In 1984, Killingbeck was honoured with the Harry Jerome Award for Sport Excellence, awarded to outstanding Black Canadian Athletes.

Women in Canada have made great strides in many areas of sport. However, the acceptance of women in sport over several centuries has not been easily won. And while the "Matchless Six" who competed at the 1928 Summer Olympics did not consider themselves pioneers, they certainly played an important role in advancing women's participation and acceptance in the world of sport. Sport is no longer considered a masculine activity. Women from all walks of life are getting involved in physical fitness and sports more than ever before. Canadian women can be very proud of their athletic achievements. And there are still many more medals waiting to be won.

Some Significant Breakthroughs

1924 Cecile Smith, a fifteen year-old figure skater, is the first woman to represent Canada in the Olympics. She competed in the Winter Olympics in Chamonix, France.

1950 Bobbie Rosenfeld is named Outstanding Canadian Athlete of the half-century. Over the years, she competed in seven track and field disciplines, won tennis titles and starred in basketball and baseball. She is one of only three Canadians to have won two Olympic track and field medals.

1954 Marilyn Bell, a sixteen year-old high school student, becomes the first person to swim across Lake Ontario.

1980 Abby Hoffman (who represented Canada at four Olympics as a runner,) is the first woman elected to be an executive member of the Canadian Olympic Association.

1986 Gail Greenough becomes the first woman, the first Canadian and the youngest person ever to win the World Championship in equestrian show jumping.

1990 Charmaine Crooks, a Black woman from North Vancouver, becomes the first Canadian woman to run 800 metres in less than 2 minutes. She currently holds the Canadian record.

1991 Jo-Anne Polack becomes the first woman general manager of a major football club, the Ottawa Roughriders.

1991 Manon Rhéaume becomes the first woman goalie to play with a major junior hockey team in Quebec. In 1992 she becomes the first woman to play in the National Hockey League.

1992 Deborah Wright becomes the National Hockey League's first woman scout.

1992 Judy Kent is named general team manager for the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, British Columbia.

1994 Myriam Bédard becomes the first woman to win two gold medals in the Winter Olympic Biathlon. Yet another first for Canadian women.

Resources

Cochrane, Jean, Abby Hoffman and Pat Kincaid, *Women in Canadian Sports*, Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1977.

Hall, M. Anna and Richardson, Dorothy A. *Fair Ball, Towards Sex Equality in Canadian Sport*. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1982.

Sadler, Rosemary, *Leading the Way, Black Women in Canada*, Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1994.